

# MORALITY IN DIET.

---

IT is strange that, among the many important subjects which at this time are demanding investigation from every thoughtful man, vegetarianism has not attracted more general attention. For, though it cannot be classed among those vexed "questions of the day," which occupy the time of parliament and agitate the surface of party politics, yet it may safely be asserted that there is no matter which more truly deserves full and patient enquiry than this question of diet, connected as it is with the deep underlying problems—How to live? How to improve and elevate, mentally and bodily, the lives of our fellow-countrymen? In all ages, from the days of Pythagoras to the days of Shelley, vegetarianism has had its prophets and apostles; but they have for the most part stood alone and isolated, solitary lights amidst almost universal darkness. Now, at last, in this progressive age, when the morality of life is more widely studied, and the laws of health and economy are better understood, earnest and hard-working men should be induced at least to give fair and unprejudiced examination to a system which claims to be at once most *moral*, most *wholesome*, and most *economical*. For these are the three great advantages which the vegetarian believes his way of living to possess; these are the three chief aspects under which vegetarianism may be viewed; and surely, amidst all the clamour and din of conflicting theories and creeds, it is right that the voice of vegetarianism should be heard, and that the cruelty and wastefulness of the system of flesh-eating should not be allowed to pass unchallenged. Obviously, the same arguments will not have like weight with all; for while to the poorer classes it is the economic advantage of vegetarianism that is of most pressing and immediate importance, to wealthier and more educated people the moral side of the question needs to be most forcibly stated. It is of this last that I would now speak. My object is to show that a bloodless diet is alone defensible on moral and æsthetic grounds.

There is a passage in Mr. Ruskin's works, where it is declared that a criterion of the morality of an action may be found in song. Actions are morally beautiful in proportion to their capability of becoming the subject of song. This is a standard from which no vegetarian will ever shrink; which no flesh-eater will ever dare to accept. The fruits and cereals of a vegetarian meal might well find mention in the purest and most delicate poem. Could the same be said of the repast of a flesh-eater? What are the dainties which Porphyro, in Keat's "Eve of St. Agnes," heaps "with glowing hand" for his love, in the retired quiet of the night? They are "candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd, manna and dates," and other "delicates" which would rejoice the soul of a vegetarian. What would have been the effect on the poem, if, instead of these, he had "heaped" "beef-steaks and mutton-chops?" And why is it that the mere idea of such a change is at once disgusting and ridiculous? Again, would it not be admitted on all hands that fruits and herbs and corn would be a right and natural subject for the skill of a vegetarian poet? Yet what should we think, if some enthusiastic flesh-eater were to give vent to the poetry of his feelings in a "Song of the Slaughter-house," or "Ballads of the Butcher?" And why is it that, while the one subject would be innocent and elevating, the other would be loathsome and degrading?

This criterion, however, may be considered too fanciful, if we carry it to its logical conclusion. So we will not ask the supporters of the present system to *sing* of such subjects: we will merely beg of them to *think*. For thought is surely the best and truest standard, by which we may distinguish the right from the wrong. That action and system are the best, which can best stand the scrutiny of thought. We will therefore venture to think about our diet; even though it be at the risk of shocking "*delicate-minded*" ladies and gentlemen, who vote it impolite and disgusting to refer to such matters as the slaughter of animals, and brand all such enquiry with the epithet



“morbid” or “sentimental.” We will cease to regard “beef” and “mutton” and “pork” as lifeless articles of food, but will remember that they have a close connection with living oxen and sheep and swine. We will request those who perpetuate the butcher’s trade by eating flesh-meat to consider seriously what that trade is. Why is the very name of *Butcher*\* proverbial? Why is the slaughter-house unmentionable at polite dinner-tables? If the system of flesh-eating is defensible, why must its method of supply be concealed from all thought or reference? The obvious answer is that this trade is a degrading one, and not only socially, but morally degrading. There are many occupations which gentlemen, for social and conventional reasons, would be ashamed to practise; such as shoe-blackening and chimney-sweeping. Yet there is no real or moral degradation in these, such as there is in the wanton slaughter of innocent animals. If our sweeps and shoe-blacks were suddenly to go on strike, and we were compelled to do such work for ourselves, a wise man, however refined, would never be ashamed to soil his hand with soot or blacking. But if, through a similar emergency, he lost the services of his butcher, he might well think twice before he polluted himself with blood.

If, then, it be a degrading occupation to kill animals, how can the habit of eating them be other than degrading? If we condemn the ignorant and brutal butcher who supplies the flesh, how can we acquit the refined ladies and gentlemen who demand it? Thoughtlessness alone enables people to endure such a system. From infancy they are taught to ignore what “meat” really is; until they hardly think of oxen and sheep in connection with beef and mutton.

Well indeed would it be, if all kindly Christian people, who say “grace” over their food, would think of the history of such a meal! If they would reflect on the agony of terror endured by imported cattle during the journey by sea or land; the disease too often engendered by the filth and misery of the voyage; the thirst, hunger, and despair; and, finally, the horrors of the slaughter-house; if they would think of this they would ask God to pardon them, at the end of their meal, and not to “make them truly thankful.”

And now contrast with this diet the life of a vegetarian. Here there is no need of secrecy and sophistry to make the meal palatable; for the history of beans and lentils is not a record of blood and suffering, and we are not obliged to dismiss all thought as to the origin of our food, lest we should awaken reminiscences of the filth of the pig-stye, and the butchery of the shambles. There is nothing to conceal, for there is nothing to be ashamed of. It is the only diet which is entirely in keeping with the highest moral instincts of the most intellectual mind.

There are also indirect advantages in vegetarianism, which can hardly fail to commend it to all those who know the value of temperance, both in food and drink. It is in general closely connected with frugality and simplicity of taste: with teetotalism it is specially allied, for moderation in drink is the natural result of moderation in food, and it is an undoubted fact that the craving for alcohol is enormously lessened by a vegetarian diet.

Such, then, are the reasons which appear to me to justify a vegetarian in branding the system of flesh-eating as degrading and immoral. And if it be an offence against the laws of morality, still more palpably does it violate the rules of good taste. The present age has witnessed, among other phenomena, the growth of what is called “Æstheticism,” the religion of a select class, which prides itself on its freedom from the barbarous “Philistinism” of the world at large. We may well be thankful for any re-action against the gross materialism and vulgarity of modern society; yet it may be doubted whether any class can be truly “æsthetic” which does not recognize in its creed the supreme importance of gentleness and humanity. The man who keenly sympathises with the suffering of dumb animals has a more truly

\*The Scotch equivalent, “Flesher,” is much more appropriate and better expresses the idea of the Butchers trade.—ED.





“æsthetic” mind than twenty of our modern connoisseurs of “high art” who are inexpressibly pained by the sight of an ugly house or an inartistic piece of furniture, while they view with entire equanimity a system of diet which necessitates the very ugly trade of the butcher.

It would be curious to know if there were any æsthetic persons present at the Alexandra Palace, among those who enjoyed the novelty of a kid dinner, given by the “British Goat Society” about a year ago. At this dinner—to quote the account then given in the *Daily News*—“The Honorary Secretary confessed to having slaughtered two of his own goats’ kids, amid the tears of his children, to satisfy the appetites of the guests, and the statement was heard without eliciting any visible sign of remorse from the company.”

We are inclined to think that the “æsthetic” taste of those who could hear this statement, without shewing very visible signs of dissatisfaction, must have been of a somewhat questionable character.

But it is needless to refer to individual instances of bad taste, when all the country is filled with the pollution of wholesale slaughter. Dwellers in London, of superior sensibility, frequently express their disgust at the unsightly streets and buildings, which everywhere meet the view, and their pity for the gross tastes and habits of their fellow-townsmen. Yet they raise no protest against the Foreign Cattle Market of Deptford, from which the wants of Londoners are largely supplied; though the deeds which are daily enacted there are such as can hardly commend themselves to an æsthetic mind. At Deptford, as we learn from a lately published account, there weekly arrive some three thousand bullocks, twenty thousand sheep, and a thousand calves. When they are landed at the entrance, “the creatures, to do them justice, are not often ill-conducted. Stupefied by the voyage, they are generally quiet enough, but sometimes the truth breaks in upon them, and they make a desperate effort for freedom. It is easy to guess what frightens them, for there is a strange scent in the air.” Such are the circumstances under which the animals enter these slaughter-houses, all of them, be it remembered, naturally harmless and gentle. They are finally “conducted to the long range of narrow stalls at the rear of the slaughter-houses. The scene is here busy enough, and the celerity with which the work is done sufficiently remarkable—at one end the fine great beasts go in, at the other emerge great sides of beef, hoofs, hides, and horns. There is much less uproar over the sheep, which are killed and dressed with great celerity.”

Pitiable indeed must be the mental and moral condition of those who can read such an account as this without loathing and disgust. And if the mere mention of it is well-nigh intolerable, what is to be said of the system which necessitates the continual enactment of such scenes? Can any thoughtful man, in the face of such horrors, deliberately choose to be a flesh-eater? Must he not rather turn with relief to a vegetarian diet, with which alone can exist that widely sympathetic intellectual gentleness, which recognises the rights, not of man only, but of all the animal creation. To repeat the oft-quoted but seldom-appreciated lines of Coleridge—

“He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things, both great and small :  
For the dear God, who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.”

This is surely the true morality of life: without this, Arts and Sciences and Literature and Philosophy are at best but imperfect and inconsistent.

Here, however, it may perhaps be objected, that, although vegetarianism may be desirable on abstract grounds of morality and good taste, nevertheless flesh-eating is, for physical reasons, a practical necessity of nature, and, being natural, cannot be immoral. This, of course, belongs rather to the physical than the moral question; and it remains for those who have satisfied themselves that vegetarianism is desirable, to determine further whether it is practicable. It is sufficient here to indicate the fact that



medical men are not only not infallible, but liable to all the prejudices that affect the unprofessional mind; so that would-be vegetarians need not be greatly alarmed by the stock arguments which are regularly produced by doctors, cooks, relatives, and other well-meaning persons, in the way of solemn warning and advice. The vegetarian is assured that the impossibility of such a diet for man is clearly demonstrated by the formation of the teeth, and other structural evidence. Some nations and individuals may contrive to live on vegetable food, in spite of these physical hindrances; but at any rate in northern climates a flesh diet is necessary, for the sake of heat. And if some obstinate people even here persist in living in perfect health without animal food, still it is absolutely certain (and this is the final resource, the great irrefragable dogma of the flesh-eater) that meat is necessary to foster intellectual vigour, even where physical strength may be supported without it.

And thus the fellow-countrymen of Shelley are led to believe that the finest work cannot be done without the grossest food; and that while man's mortal body may be nourished on a pure and bloodless diet, it is the intellect, the spark that kindles the fire of poetry, music, science, and the arts,—it is the intellect which requires to be fed on the loathsome carcasses of slaughtered sheep and bullocks!

We vegetarians, and especially those of us who are ignorant of physiological science, could have no desire, even if we had the temerity, to speak disrespectfully of the medical profession. Yet, when we hear doctors asserting the "impossibility" of vegetarianism, in spite of the undeniable existence among us of vegetarians, in full mental and bodily vigour, we cannot but feel an inclination to exclaim in the words of Shakespere—

"We dare not call them fools; yet this we think,  
When they are thirsty, fools would fain have drink."

Let us therefore, one and all, undismayed by sonorous warnings and dogmatic assertions, quietly and fearlessly ask our own consciences if the present system of diet is morally right and defensible; and if the answer be, as I have attempted to prove it must be, in the negative, let us not shrink from the consequent duty of attempting a reform. The experience of those who have honestly and seriously made trial of vegetarianism gives overwhelming testimony in its favour. Its economical advantage is indisputably great; not less conspicuous, to those who make practical proof for themselves, is its physical superiority; insuring, as it does, a simpler, healthier, more enjoyable manner of life; and affording immunity, as vegetarians very plausibly assert, from many of our worst diseases and epidemics.

The progress of all reforms is slow; and in the question of diet, as in all others, a national error takes centuries, as Sydney Smith has observed, "to display the full bloom of its imbecility," yet a vegetarian, without being over sanguine, may well comfort himself with the reflection, that, in the case of flesh-eating, these conditions have now been amply fulfilled, and that the outlook is therefore not entirely devoid of encouragement. Centuries have passed; we see our upper classes rioting in degrading wastefulness, while our lower classes are sunk in degrading want, and both alike the victims of degrading, because unnecessary, disease. The failure of our diet-system is complete; the bloom of its imbecility is displayed for all eyes to see. Is it too much to hope that we may soon cease to be blinded by prejudice and custom, and that the civilised world may, before many generations have passed, adopt the opinion of the philanthropist Howard, founded on a life-time of experience and observation? "I am fully persuaded as to the health of our bodies, that herbs and fruits will sustain nature in every respect far beyond the best flesh."

H. S. SALT.

(Please circulate this paper.)

PRINTED BY THOMAS BAINES, FAIRFAX ROAD, SOUTH HAMPSTEAD.

WELLCOME INSTITUTE	
LIBRARY	
Coll.	welMCom
Coll.	pam WB 400
No.	188* 517m